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The World Cathedral: Lessons from Standing Rock

Dr. Michael Schuck (right) with his son Franz at Oceti Sakowin Camp

By Dr. Michael Schuck

I remember an exquisite liturgy for the feast of St. Ignatius at Loyola University of Chicago's Madonna della Strada Chapel. The readings were rich; the celebrant's homily was well-crafted; the acolytes' gestures were graceful and dignified. The voices of the diverse congregation blended astonishingly well inside beautiful, evocative music. By the recessional, my cheek had a tear track.

Later, I told a Jesuit friend about the experience, adding that had I had a Coleman stove and sleeping bag, I would have taken up residence in a side altar and basked for days in the holy afterglow. My friend peered at me incredulously, then spoke with conviction: "Not me. When I'm in a church I can't wait to get out!" A Jesuit contemplative in action, indeed.

I felt that same holy comfort at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. Every morning the prayers and ceremony at Oceti Sakowin Camp were voiced in an enchanting blend of Lakota, Ojibwe, and English. Restored with sacred purpose, camp residents re-entered the mystic rhythm of daily work: wood chopping, donation sorting, guest orienting, legal counseling, food preparing, fire tending, camp cleaning, and action planning. Like the drone of a bagpipe, Native elders recurrently spoke lessons of profound

simplicity at the fire circle. Each day ended with spirit-infused drumming, chanting, and an offering to the night sky, which always appeared well pleased. Standing Rock was a daily liturgy for the feast of Mother Earth — a side altar in the cathedral of the universe.

But there was also discord. Shortly after celebrating the Obama administration's December 5 denial of easement for drilling under the Missouri River, one elder spoke a difficult message. With calm acumen, he asked that we guests of the Standing Rock Sioux now depart and take the message of *Mni Wiconi* — "Water is Life" — back to our homes.

My inclination was to stoke my Coleman stove, crawl in my sleeping bag, and reside at this site of sacred promise. But the latent power of my Jesuit friend's audacious remark came alive in the tranquil judgment of a Sioux elder. I sulkily packed my bags. The *agere contra* (an Ignatian concept of "acting against" behaviors that are not life-giving) is unsettling, even coming from an indigenous holy man.

Much has occurred at Standing Rock since then. I stay abreast of developments as best I can. I feel it is important that Oceti Sakowin Camp survives in

some form. Knowing that the flame of ceremony and prayer is alive at Standing Rock is matchless spiritual fuel for environmental activists everywhere.

Meanwhile, I share information about Standing Rock with everyone I can. I participate in the American Indian Center's #NODAPL marches and protests. I have had my embers of awareness from Standing Rock stoked further at a CROAR (Chicago Regional Organizing for AntiRacism) workshop. I am incorporating the message of *Mni Wiconi* into my courses.

Standing Rock changed me, not by replacing my old spirit with a new one but by bringing my old spirit to life. I still love the restorative power of Church liturgies, but I feel more deeply now the truth of what my Jesuit friend meant and a Sioux elder taught: the world is the proper cathedral for faiths that do justice. ✠

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Visit www.jesuitsmidwest.org/dapl to read the Jesuits' statement on the Dakota Access Pipeline.